# Thinking Religion and Religious Studies

A Methodological Challenge

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**Abstract**
*This article argues religious studies is a discipline specifically designed for answering the big questions about religion. The comparative and general study of religion is what emerges when scholarship abandons the big questions about religion. This occurs first by the field's distancing from theology and later philosophy. Historical and phenomenological approaches present religious studies as a pluralistic and multidisciplinary research field, whilst arguably it is originally polymethodic. The difference, I argue, is that the religious studies discipline is better defined by a multiple methods approach rather than a disciplinary hybridity. I make my argument by discussing the philosophical method of "thinking" as necessary to reclaim for religious studies and specifically making the case for thinking as a key method for religious studies research.*

**Keywords**
*Religious studies, history of religions, philosophy of religion, religious thought, phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, multi-disciplinarity, reductionism, essence of religion, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Max Müller, methodology.*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I make the argument for religious studies as a discipline and "thinking" as a key method. I note this is a contentious point, though one that finds merit in a revised reading of two key figures not always thought about concurrently: Friedrich Max Müller and Martin Heidegger. I hope to show that religious studies is distinctive because of its unique approach to studying religion, and it is this very approach that is forgotten because of its gradual disconnection from theology and then philosophy. It has thus, to use the language of later Heidegger, lost its spacing, or put differently, forgotten its beginning (*Seinsvergessenheit*). It now floats through the abyss of disciplinary plurality and thus submits to the ambiguity about its own origin. To further quote Heidegger, it is no longer "on the way" to its beginning (see Malpas 2023, 225 on "topology of thinking"). It might appear odd to apply Heidegger's assertions about philosophy to religion and religious studies, as this could be construed as an assertion about whether Heidegger was religious or had a religious point to make; however, there is a significant link between his philosophy and the study of religion that I would like to explore. What he conveyed by the end was clearly significant in terms of understanding ourselves in the world into which we are born and to which we must make a return after the forgetting of our "first beginning" (Malpas 2023, 209). Heidegger deliberately associated this

problem to the forgetfulness of philosophy as a discipline, which opens the way for me to discuss it, in similar terms, about religious studies.

I will start by saying that my rendering of "method" is not the same as that which corresponds with current methodological trends, such as those publications that predominate in a journal like *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*. I accept that for many of us method is less of a prescriptive and more adaptable tool for research, but what I see in Müller and Heidegger is method as distinctly intuitive. I believe this follows on from Gadamer's own concerns about method, as expounded in *Truth and Method*, in which he explains interpretation as both a nuanced and complex activity that cannot be reduced to a set of rules and procedures, advocating instead for a more open and flexible approach to interpretation that considers the nature of understanding. Given the connection between thinking and *aletheia* in Heidegger—and with being, as does Müller (1893, 330–333) in his discussion of Parmenides—it may seem unusual at first to treat thinking as a method or similarly speak about a "method" associated with *aletheia*. Heidegger, especially in the later writing, is generally antagonistic to method, but I hope to show that his antagonism is targeted at the overreliance on method as a systematic, rigid, and prescriptive approach, which he identified as contributing to a mode of thinking that he regarded as not thinking, or calculative thinking. I am mindful not to assert thinking as a restrictive tool, and similarly not to treat this as an exercise that confines thinking to a definitive consequence. Rather, I wish to press on with my argument that thinking is substantively, though inherently, linked to method as that which is adaptable and versatile rather than constraining. I appreciate the usual way that continental philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer are read as advancing thinking in a deeper, more meaningful, sense than thinking as rendered in scientific terms as merely a cognitive process. Yet, I would add thinking is at its core a complex process essential to our ability to adapt and interact with our environment, and though neither Heidegger nor Gadamer would deny this, I suspect that thinking is the foremost method for this process that assists our understanding. I say foremost because it seems to me this method is firstly innate but also, and more importantly, because it is, to borrow a Heideggerian term, "withdrawn," that is, concealed from view. Simply put, it is withdrawn because the primary function of our perceptive mind is endlessly "busy" with the apparent and changeable circumstances around us. Calculative thinking thus has its place here too, as does the inherent condition of thinking as a principal method of human understanding.

With thinking as relating to Müller, I am equally aware of the fact that he is not explicitly presenting "thinking" as a method in the ordinary sense. Müller's reference to thinking is more subtle and is directly drawn out of his reading of classical and medieval sources. Yet it is nevertheless an implicitly denoted approach which he explains as part of his methodology that generally shows how he makes his way back in time through the textual evidence.

## 2. Friedrich Max Müller and Martin Heidegger

Having recently read through Müller's third volume of the Gifford Lectures entitled *Psychological Religion* and Heidegger's *Was heißt Denken?*, I was struck by the small but meaningful degree of resonance between them. I had completed my reading of the latter and when I began to read Müller, the parallels immediately stood out. For Heidegger said that "thinking is originally performed as λόγος" (Heidegger 1976, 156) and thus "[t]hinking is the most precursory of all precursory activities of man in this era...." (Heidegger 1976, 160). His translator summarised his argument thus, "To discover what thinking is we are instead led back to the origins of Greek thinking before Aristotle" (Heidegger 1976: viii). We read in Müller (1983, 381): "Logos in Greek, before it was adopted for higher philosophical purposes, meant simply word, but word not as a mere sound, but as thought embodied in sound;" strikingly, "[n]othing could supply a better simile for God thinking and uttering the cosmos than the act of man in thinking and uttering his thought" (Müller 1893, 382). Some of this is obviously due to their classical training; other parts, perhaps because Heidegger read Müller.1 Despite this, they are reflecting along the same lines about the importance of thinking, and I will take up their views on thinking in more detail later. Though this is not strictly a comparative study of the two figures, their discussion on thinking is however critical to the argument of the paper.

Separated by their respective disciplines, Müller and Heidegger shared an unexpected interest in the role and meaning of thought and thinking. For Müller, this is shown through the channel of history of ideas whereas for Heidegger, it is mainly through the philosophical tradition. We can already see the history-philosophy crossover in both minds as well as their particular debt to theology, generally, despite the antagonism that still prevails against theology in historical and philosophical departments. Yet in neither Müller nor Heidegger do we find blatant antipathy to theology; instead, we find reservation and restraint—another point of correspondence that will be important for the purposes of the present article, which is to show that religious studies, as a discipline, is most readily suited to thinking as a method.

I should explain that my use of "thinking" here is in direct reference to Heidegger's treatment of it as a method or process of knowing and disclosing what remains withdrawn from our perception. As he explains in *Was heißt Denken*? thinking was not merely the cognitive process defining general human awareness of daily concerns. Specifically, as J. G. Grey explains, for Heidegger thinking is not "what we call having an opinion or a notion" or "representing or having an idea (*vorstellen*) about something or a state of affairs" (Heidegger 1976, x). Thinking, to Heidegger, is fundamentally the way by which we can reach back through time to the thought of the ancients. In his case, the Greeks—Parmenides, Heraclitus, especially—but also any other thought from long ago that our thinking might have access to by way of language

[1] Müller was influenced by the "Hegelian framework" popular at the time of his undergraduate studies and was as a young scholar influenced by Lotze and Schelling—he had also translated Immanuel Kant into English (Trompf 2005, 46–50, 53). Also, Trompf (1978); van den Bosch (2002).

that survives from that time. As he repeatedly makes known in that lecture series, learning how to think (in the special sense defined) is the means by which we can attempt to retrieve what was thought before.

Heidegger revives a remarkable idea. True, no approach is perfect, and Heidegger's method was far from foolproof. His approach was, in principle, carried out within the confines of philosophy, but was also loosely dependent upon linguistics and, to a lesser extent, philology. Müller, the British philologist of German origin, who before Heidegger had already discussed the value of following the train of thought back to its origins, presented a philological examination that relied chiefly on historical methods (Müller 1893). As I say, my aim here is not to defend the specific cases of Müller's and Heidegger's methodology, but rather follow on in their use of thinking as a method for understanding religion. My defence of this—bringing thinking as a method to religious studies—lies in the argument made in its support. Because the alternative is to understand religion where research is predisposed to specific concerns of disciplinary value (be it, sociological, psychological, or historical). No doubt we need to understand religion in terms of human behaviour, material culture, and so on, all of which is invaluable for given purposes, but this too is reason enough to justify understanding religion by way of thinking. Another way to say it is that thinking is a way of *doing* religious studies, and, especially so, if we take the task of religious studies to be the thoughtful interrogation of religion. I am of course working with the understanding that religion is reflected in the recorded history of human experience and recognition of perceived deities. This can certainly lend itself to all the ways religion is explored scientifically through traditional and modern disciplines, but it lends itself particularly well to the big questions about human existence and its place in the universe that I argue belong to religious studies specifically.

In the way that I aim to capture religious studies, understanding religion must necessarily involve thinking as a way of recovering truth, or unconcealing what is concealed about it; especially given the now prevailing modes of analysis that have become so heavily reliant on automated thinking (or rather unthinking, if we want to be wicked). Excusing the cliché, this technologisation of thinking—clearly a "sacred" element in Heidegger's thought, and as cited above, the identified aspect of the holy in Müller—has made way for the triumph of calculative reasoning. We do not have to go so far as to say "the death of thinking," but we might agree that the task of thinking is now well and truly an underappreciated asset to learning, let alone an increasingly unrecognised quality of human understanding. The demotion of the role of thinking is directly linked to a culture that devalues the importance of thinking. Thinking, despite Müller and Heidegger's qualified use of it, is very much linked to a wider humanities concern with the refinement of the individual, to invoke the Greek concept of *paideia*. The cultivation of thinking, even at a basic level of education, equips the person with a capacity for deeper reflection and consideration at times of need. I say this to be clear that the case for thinking does not need defending, nor its worth further justification.

Even if we do not agree with the overall project of our thinkers or whatever the case may be that we disagree with some aspect of their thinking and approach, we cannot disagree about the value of thinking. I will now outline my argument, which is to be supported with further evidence and discussion throughout.

As I see it, the value of thinking, as a mode of doing religious studies, is twofold. First, religious studies emerged from a scholarly need to understand religion, which involved reflecting on the nature and existence of religion in general terms. Second, the emergence of religious studies was linked to a basic human impulse to comprehend itself and its place in the world. In which case, the activity of religious studies, in the manner proposed, nourished a key human need that was linked to its capacity for intelligibility. At the core of this human quality rests the activity of thinking. I should say that my intention is not to tuck the exercise of thinking into the narrative of my own thinking process here as Müller did in his Gifford Lectures, nor do I wish to mystify it in the way that Heidegger may be seen to have done in his writings, generally. Instead, I have been forthcoming about both what I see in Müller and Heidegger and their thoughts in connection to one another, as well as what I propose this actually entails. My point at this stage is that thinking as a human ability to rationalise and comprehend is actually an unspoken tool with the ability to reach back in time through the thoughts of historical figures. Müller (1893, 522–523) is clear on this. This is what we do when we open ourselves up to the ideas of those we read (say, Plato, Avicenna, or Pascal), and so through this exercise we are transported not physically but mentally to converse with their thought through our own thinking. No miracles or mystics here. The question, then, is what is the value of thinking for religious studies and why should we consider it for religious studies as a method?

The purpose of employing "thinking" as a method when undertaking religious studies is to understand religion. Because religious studies emerged to answer questions about religion, it has to serve as a guiding discipline for the inquiry into the nature of religion. Similarly, it must ask about its origin and beginning in relation to human existence and human perception of the divine. I accept that this is not the immediate concern of all scholars studying religion and I also appreciate the fact that researchers have interests in more niche areas of investigation. Despite this, I submit that religious studies retains at its core the "big picture" concern. And it is this that chiefly differentiates it from other disciplines that study religions. To continue this line of thought religious studies is, as Müller presented it long ago, originally about understanding religion as the connecting tissue that binds human and divine (Müller 1893, 534–535). This is Müller's consistent theme for the lecture series; for instance he says (1893, 90): "real religion is founded on a true perception of the *relation* of the soul to God and of God to the soul."

If religious studies is about finding answers to questions about religion and if finding these answers rests on our ability to think reflexively and deeply, then we can agree that thinking is helpful to religious studies. Going a step further, if we agree that thinking is a particular

ability linked to our capacity for intelligibility that permits us not just analysis and critique but also apprehension of what may not be always present to mind, then we can agree also that thinking can serve as a special method for doing religious studies.

Therefore, my argument that thinking might be identified as a principal method for religious studies research relies on seeing religious studies as a discipline motivated by the probing of big questions. Disciplines other than religious studies that seek to understand religion do so through their specific focus, which might be looking at religion in terms of social behaviour or cultural production or psychology. As I see it, they are not concerned primarily with the "big questions." They are theory driven, but broadly a generalist impetus is absent in them. (Generalist here is precisely the "renaissance person" with reference to Paideia.) Their focus lies in specific issues, hence the highly particularised nature of their discipline. Moreover, what they will tell us about religion must correspond with their disciplinary concerns. While it is the prerogative of any discipline to produce research composite to its interests, religious studies is denied this opportunity by multidisciplinarity. Having a disciplinary focus will be for religious studies a new clearing for thinking about religion.

## 3. The Example of the Phenomenology of Religion

Religious studies was at one time defined by a particular focus. During the golden age of the phenomenology of religion that lasted from the 1930s to the 1970s, it was the specific branch of the science of religion influenced by two sources: Husserl's philosophical phenomenology and liberal Christian theology (Cox 2023, 97).

Phenomenologists of religion moved to distinguish "their approach from methods employed by theologians, philosophers, and social scientists by arguing that religions must be interpreted according to a unique methodology" (Cox 2023, 97–98). The example serves as a precedent for my argument that religious studies must have its own distinctive discipline, by which I mean both a recognisable disciplinary focus and methodology. I will speak to this elsewhere. James Cox has recently argued for the revival of his discipline, by way of reinterpreting the core values of its branch of science of religion, by means of the "joint ownership of knowledge" principle (Cox 2023). I note this because it demonstrates that its critics have committed the greater sin of the objectification and reification of the locality of religions and religious communities through posturing of critical distance (Cox 2023, 99–100). Well-known detractors such as Robert Segal (1983), Paul-François Tremlett (2008), and Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) have called out the essentialising tendency in notable works that betray a degree of theologising. For them, Eliade's idea of "the sacred" (1987, 20–24), van der Leeuw's reduction of religion to "power" (1938, 23–28), or Wilfred Cantwell Smith's treatment of religion as faith in relation to "transcendence" (1964, 168) are "grand interpretations" that have essentialised religion. Yet a wholesale rejection of phenomenology is blind to its continued commitment to research that seeks to "see as the believer sees" (Cox 2023, 99). Grand theorists are not infallible and are often the strawmen for detractors of religious

studies. The value of "grand interpretations" remains a point of contention, but we can only do away with this element in the study of religion at the risk of objectifying and reifying what religion means for us and those that practice (and of course live) it (Cox 2023, 98; Kristensen 1960). I disagree with Fitzgerald's assessment tout court that "Little of critical value has come from religious studies qua religious studies, that is, insofar as the field has been dominated by phenomenology of religion and, beyond that, liberal ecumenical theology" (Fitzgerald 2000, 217), and I will assert that religious studies qua religious studies is what is precisely misunderstood in criticisms levelled against it by those claiming a blinkered view of the empirical and scientific study of religion.

Phenomenology of religion uses some of philosophy's methods such as *epoché*, but it is not driven by a philosophical pursuit of the big questions. The latter is critical in my argument for reimagining religious studies.

## 4. Religion and the Big Questions

The big questions are about the ultimate things. Whilst I am enthused by Robert Neville's (2018) argument that the future of philosophy of religion rests on its return to engaging with the big questions, I note Diego Bubbio's (2009) caution that despite the need for its continued engagement with religious content, it must embrace post-Kantian perspectivism to prevent it from slipping into dogmatism.

The big questions were historically the domain of metaphysics and later theology. Through both runs a qualified current of philosophy, before its modern manifestation, which for me deals directly with such issues as the source of life, the reason for our existence, our purpose as human beings, and the way we should live. Engaging with the big questions is also ontologically and existentially driven where we ask about the nature of God or existence, how things relate to one another and why they do so in the way that they do. I do not deny that religions and philosophers have traditionally provided (mostly) satisfying answers to these questions. This is a good indication that it is not about redefining how we talk about religion as much as it is reconsidering how important it is to place religion in its proper relationship to ultimate things. I agree "that religion consists in engagements of ultimate realities" (Neville 2018, para. 42) yet assert religious studies cannot but do this.

For Neville, philosophy of religion is equipped to deal with the big questions. For me, it is religious studies. Regardless, we share the same concern and face the same problem in our disciplines. For he says, "To the extent religious studies does not include the philosophy necessary for a disciplined treatment of ultimate realities, it cannot study religion, only religion's texts and traditions, social organizations, and so forth" (Neville 2018, para. 42). This is true. Ordinarily, not all studies of religion scholars are engaged with ultimate things when studying religion. Many are focused on certain aspects of religion they find interesting or relevant as pertaining to their specialisations. I see this philosophical current as essential,

necessary, and critical to the work of religious studies. Going a step further, I would say it is innate to religious studies work. The principal task of religious studies scholarship is engaging with ultimate things. Moreover, religious studies has at its roots a philosophical tendency that is forgotten and gradually overshadowed by other concerns in the academic study of religion. As I will argue, this loss of identity has something to do with anxieties about theology as a taboo subject in an increasingly secular academy. By avoiding theology, and steering clear of philosophy, religious studies throws out the baby with the bathwater and effectively abandons the big questions in favour of more descriptive, empirical research.

I suspect that philosophy of religion and religious studies are cognate fields of study and, carefully examined, they mirror each other in their ultimate goal. Despite university politics, they are about ultimate things because both deal with what is historically itself an ultimate thing: religion. I think what Bubbio (2009) reveals gives credence to the view that what separates them is less than the task that is at heart philosophical. Philosophy of religion may have the word "philosophy" in the name but as Neville (2018) highlights, this has not done much to remind philosophers to do big question work. Like scholars of religion, they are focused on specific issues of concern. Religious studies on the other hand does not have "philosophy" in the name but it does have a philosophical component that defines its quest for religion. For me, then, it is important to realise the philosophical roots of religious studies because this is what distinguishes it from other approaches to studies of religion, setting it apart as a discipline rather than a broad study of religion. Religious studies entails the application of this philosophical lens to its examination of the history and theology of religion. Significant not because of the discipline of philosophy, which has its own prerogative, but because philosophy has running through it, since the Eleatics at least, the importance of thinking as the link between human understanding and ultimate things. Citing Parmenides on Being, Müller paraphrases "Nor is thinking different from being, because there is nothing but being, and thinking is thinking of being" (Müller 1893, 334). Heidegger qualifies this (2003, 2) as being present in thinking rather than as thinking per se—"what is present in presence" (1976, 243) and more importantly what leads to discerning the "original speech of language" (1976, 244), which for me is intimately linked to understanding religion.

## 5. Comparative and General Study of Religion

Studying religion can be multidisciplinary, yet this should not preclude it from having a singular focus and goal. Studying religion began as a way to understand religion in terms of the connecting tissue between human and divine. Most world religions embody this at their core in some form. Indeed, religion can really be thought of as a bridge, and there is no shortage of myths about bridges in religious traditions (Harrison 2021). My point being that the religious studies scholar looks to specific material evidence for access to the bigger picture. This scholar may be a specialist in one kind of evidence but they can also work with other kinds. The scholar limited by specialisation will know more about a particular kind of

evidence, but this will preclude bigger picture estimations. So, the activity of religious studies is better defined as polymethodic rather than multidisciplinary. The polymethodic nature of religious studies signals the value of disciplinary singularity assisted by varieties of method. The multidisciplinary nature of the study of religion, however, promotes method and theory connected to disciplinary diversity at the expense of methodological focus on ultimate things.

This calls into question whether religious studies is correctly defined as the comparative and general study of religion. Too often religious studies is determined by way of scholars' disciplinary orientation, giving the false impression of an overreliance on method and theory. Compounded by the fact that the main bulk of studies of religion books continuously emphasise the multidisciplinarity of the field (Segal and Roubekas 2021; Strenski 2015), one can hardly find reference to thinking as a key to understanding religion. Instead, proposals for novel approaches *to* thinking about religion dominate. A good example is Jeppe Jensen's *The Study of Religion in a New Key*. It critically outlines past problems and presents future prospects of the field, but it runs counter to the case I make. Nevertheless, it will help the reader better appreciate my reasoning by knowing what Jensen proposes.

Jensen meets the assault on religious studies front on. For him, thinking "in a new key" (Jensen 2003, 13) is the way forward. In effect, he wants to revitalise the phenomenology of religion by addressing the wider concerns of religious studies research. I do not object to Jensen's conclusions on what "religious studies" is as a field of study and what we see as "religious," however, we differ on two points. One, Jensen is effectively discussing the study of religion generally whilst I am addressing religious studies as a generalist discipline. Two, Jensen wants to restore "science of religion" as the original classification of the field, which is agreeable for studying religion generally and in broad terms. Yet *Religionswissenschaft* for me is a field with a forgotten purpose; a purpose that is necessarily refined in focus but requires the intervention of the generalist and universalist (polymethodic) scholar. We part ways on Jensen's definition of religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Jensen 2003, 21), since my definition of religion is linked to thought (Logos, Eidos, *fikr*, *Denken*). Jensen is working with the category of "religious studies" through the sub-specialisation of phenomenology of religion, whereas I am treating religious studies as primarily the disciplinary domain of the generalist scholar.

Jensen describes the key change as from "metaphysical 'givens' and psychological experiences to the social, symbolic and linguistic constructions of human habitats" (Jensen 2003, 13). For me, it denotes the difference that separates religious studies from other general and comparative studies of religion, such as Jensen's "new comparativism." For Jensen, this is indicative of an important shift from the old to the new, while retaining important foundations of earlier studies of religion (Jensen 2003, chap. 3). However, in my view, such metaphysical "givens" and experiences of the mind are foundational for both religious studies and what we understand as religious. We cannot take the mind out of the equation

any more than we can deny the fundamental building blocks of the universe, however complex and elusive. I am comfortable with our difference on this, since Jensen is speaking about what is needed for a genuinely viable comparative religion in relation to his preferred "model sciences" (linguistics and anthropology). These he adopts as exemplary for the study of religion, not only to strengthen the phenomenology of religion approach but also to adjust the old comparative religion to deal with the new criticisms posed by postmodernism and the linguistic turn (Jensen 2003, 413). Jensen's strategy is to revive the phenomenology of religion in the face of its near extinction by embedding it in the comparative and general study of religion as inclusivist research. I am less concerned with the postmodern critique for two reasons: I am not arguing for a broadly defined science of religion and so do not argue that religious studies must be an inclusivist discipline for it to be a viable field of study. I argue instead: that religious studies has the specific task of addressing the big questions; that thinking is a crucial method; and what others have thought serves as vital evidence. All this requires fundamentally that we are capable of—what I will come to shortly—*thinking its thoughts*. We are thus required to learn to *speak its language*. My defence against postmodernism, as understood by Jean-François Lyotard and Jürgen Habermas, comes in the form of Gianni Vattimo's argument via Heidegger (Vattimo 1987).

Jensen further states that scholarly activity is "concerned with 'meaning making,'" which is why "scholars use so many words," but I am less in agreement with his statement that meaning making "is not just about fitting our words to the world and then judging propositional truth conditions or the degree of verifiability" (Jensen 2003, 452–453). The point about meaning cannot be taken as a rule because whatever we do as makers of meaning involves, even to the minutest and unwitting degree, judgement about truth conditions. Indeed, the very exercise of scholarly activity underlines such thinly veiled hostility, which stems from epistemological viewpoints, and which is retained despite the better intentions of scholars, regardless of how well-trained they might be in their respective fields as "objective" analysts. It goes to the point of Jensen's book that such inherent conditioning has to be overcome, especially if the study of religion is to have any hope in the future academy. He is right that we can begin our investigations from various disciplinary points of origin, but it is imperative we remember that they are simply starting points of inquiry. Jensen gives hope to the comparative and general study of religion as a valuable and ongoing field of study, but I am unable to concur with his turn to semiotics as the way forward. Religion is not merely about signs and symbols. Religious signs and symbols point to more than what is on the surface. My own sense of it through a Heideggerian reading of meaning precludes our stopping at signs and symbols. I appreciate this is Jensen's way for an open invitation to all scholars working on religion to engage across a normative plane, but I am reluctant to accept the compromise of losing touch with *aletheia*. Meaning making cannot then be just an exercise in the construction of what we take to be meaningful, it must be indicative of the unspoken and unthought aspect of our being in the world that is always understood by us intuitively. It is thus what permits human beings to make sense not only of themselves and the world but

themselves as *in-the-world*. Yet, as we know from the Heidegger of the Le Thor seminars, in particular, meaning making is not a primary aim of his work. By then Heidegger had rethought many topics of inquiry—including the preoccupation with meaning—speaking instead more about truth (and place) (see Malpas 2023). I am disinclined to turn away from Heidegger's particular hermeneutic phenomenology and likewise from Müller's conclusions about language and psychology in the human endeavour to grasp at the meaning and truth of religion. They may not be fashionable, but serious studies never are. In this way, I cannot fully accept Jensen's proposition that religion and the study of it is ultimately "a narrative activity" corresponding to a "normative mode" for how humans make meaning (Jensen 2003, 453). If we classify religion and religious studies in terms of the activity of normative narratives and for the sake of intersubjectivity, we lose something significant about it. Jensen is right that the study of religion is as natural to human activity as any other where we exercise comparative and general analysis, and scholars of religion should be free to examine religion accordingly. Moreover, it is essentially "a human activity" (2003, 453). What is lost, however, is that *thinking* is key.

## 6. Religious Studies Reimagined

To draw inspiration from both Müller and Heidegger, religious studies is about learning to speak the language of religions studied and thus to engage the thoughts there directly. The recurrent phrase in Müller's third volume of the Gifford Lectures: "to speak its language and to think its thoughts" (1893, 282), is a notion present also in Heidegger's works (1976, 244). I mean to say the task of religious studies is to get at what is otherwise beyond the purview of other disciplines. How is it different, then, when compared to the others? Religious studies is designed to address questions about religion on a big scale. It is driven by a philosophical quest and with an eye on the long history of religion. It remains open to theological and metaphysical propositions without slipping into dogmatism (Bubbio 2009). For, such content as ancient poems, ritual hymns, or cosmogonies, according to Müller represent the then state of mind of human beings that scholars of religion must take seriously.

In this regard, "religious studies" cannot be confused with "the study of religion." We know religious studies initially emerged through interdisciplinary awareness with its early representatives having a firm grounding in specific fields of study. But this led to the focused discipline for understanding religion in its ultimacy and not just religion as described phenomena. Müller, a philologist, worked to develop his comparative technique as distinguished from theological work without ignoring theologies, while dealing alone with historical facts. In preparing his Gifford Lectures, Müller was also working out what studying religion would entail. I read Müller as showing "religious studies" for the first time as both discipline and methodology. Why? First, because the complexity of traditional disciplines such as Müller's own shows us that they are constructed from arbitrary lines delineating one approach from another; often the difference between them is small if not faint. Secondly,

disciplines are defined by the methods that substantiate the branch of knowledge they serve. Thirdly, because religious studies remains in contention—scholars cannot settle on what seems to be a methodology but may well be a discipline. Certainly, one could support the study of religion as a "discipline" through disciplinary hybridity. (The path Jensen follows.) What I propose needs consideration, however, is the substantiation of religious studies as a discipline by defining the nature of its methodology. Looking at Müller, his approach was enriched by the comparison of ancient languages connecting ideas pertaining to theological and metaphysical propositions held by religious traditions. I see this as a polymethodic rather than multidisciplinary activity. Müller walked a fine line between history and theology and taking his example, we can see how religious studies research contains not only a philosophical component of ultimate things, but also a quest for religion in history (rather than the historicisation of religion), and a degree of theological curiosity. Once the methodology was realised, the possibility of a new discipline could be recognised. Religious studies is thus a discipline by virtue of it being underpinned by the polymethodic nature of its approach.

If I am right that religious studies holds a polymethodic preoccupation, it will not suffice to have it beholden either to multidisciplinarity or the concerns of specific disciplines. Admittedly, religious studies owes its deepest impulses to the trinity of philosophy, history, and theology because of the deep thinking that is traditionally associated with them. Hence, the importance of thinking and its value as a key method for the discipline of religious studies becomes apparent as the point of difference between polymethodic and multidisciplinary preoccupations. Because thinking is not (formally) recognised as a method by these disciplines, and because at least two of them have abandoned it, thinking as a method for the discipline of religious studies is a crucial way to its own distinctive status. Since thinking (as method) is not a restrictive approach, it can easily complement the suite of methods already at the disposal of religious studies research.

## 7. Thinking, Thought, and Religion

Implicit in Müller's historical undertaking was the philosophical approach. Though he was not actively pursuing a philosophical path in his works, Müller discerns the importance of thinking for understanding. Throughout the third volume of the Gifford Lectures, Müller consistently underlines the importance of thought as indeed the primary subject of his investigation and the prized assurance for certainty. That philosophy is distinctly about the method of thinking is particularly brought out in Heidegger's later works. It is, however, as we know, owed to Plato's doctrine of recollection (*Meno* 81C–D). Heidegger, however, draws out of Plato a more specific motivation, in which I argue thinking is disclosed as *the* method for discernment. Thinking, in connection with the Platonic ανάμνηση, is given a higher and more definitive purpose, it would appear. My suspicion is that Heidegger intuited thinking as key to understanding truth (αλήθεια). Thus, in this essential (i.e., *wesentlich*, *ursprünglich*)

reading of thinking in philosophy, we could argue that Heidegger's take on thinking reveals something about a method for understanding truth that is well removed from how we ordinarily consider method.

Robert Harrison is often heard saying on *Entitled Opinions*: "we practice this persecuted religion of thinking" (Harrison 2024). As Harrison suggests, there is something "religious" about thinking. As I have signalled, and now wish to bring to bear on the discussion, thinking and religion share a phenomenal link. Heidegger's famously repeated line in *Was heißt Denken?* is what is most thought-provoking in our time is that we are still not thinking. I do not assume he said this because we are incapable of it but that simply we are, as he teasingly put it, not answering the call. The clue is in his asking "what calls for thinking?" By doing so, Heidegger prompts us toward thinking as the primordial link to our sought-after subject. To understand Parmenides, or Nietzsche, or Schopenhauer, as they would often feature in his works to demonstrate the point, we would need to understand their thinking. To do this, we would have to arrive at their thinking *by thinking* ourselves. What might constitute the relationship of thinking to religion for us is based on this same principle. Now, it is not Heidegger who conducted his thinking on religion but rather Müller. The same argument is clear in Müller's Lectures (1893) wherein he explains his approach via the Greek term "logos" (as does Heidegger later) as both sound and thought and that we must not be remiss of the task at hand in following the trail of thinking back to its origin point. He reminds his audience that we must not forget that words are not just sounds with meanings but thoughts that bring about thinking. In dealing with religion generally, we are, if we follow Müller, looking to the religious text and the language they speak and through that discern its thought by way of thinking. Yet this may not be too dissimilar to Heidegger's own task in seeking to locate *thinking* in his works. I say this because I am arguing that religion is intimately connected to thinking, that is, in the special sense defined. We might agree that we cannot understand religion without thinking but can the reverse be true: we cannot know thinking without religion? Indeed, a homage to the great Hegel—"the Concept of Religion reveals that the absolute can be nothing other than the self-moving activity of thinking and its actualization as spirit" (Lewis 2011, 136). Effectively, "The main moment in Aristotelian metaphysics is that thinking and what is thought are one" (Hegel, *LHP*, Pt. 1, Sec. 1, Chap. 3, B. 1).

I want to be clear that I see thinking as a method for investigation as well as signalling something more profound. Both Müller and Heidegger, as I see it, ultimately presented thinking as a method, but also followed a deeper instinct in seeing it as allowing a genuine access to truth. I would argue that thinking is an overlooked method that deserves attention, but I want to follow that deeper impulse of seeing thinking as Müller uncovered it through the works of Meister Eckhart—something of which Heidegger would almost certainly have been aware as he is so tremendously indebted to the Master (Caputo 1986)—that to think is to worship (Müller 1893, 513–523). To follow this impulse, whilst the activity of thinking can then be presented as a method for understanding religion, the more difficult argument to

make would be that thought is somehow synonymous with religion. One possible basis for this argument is if we recognise that thinking is already what underpins our relationship to religion. Thinking, in other words, bridges what might be conceived of as a gap between us and religion (a theme that is evident in Müller's lectures and also implicit in Heidegger's) (Müller 1893, 167–169, 194). But if we are following our deeper impulses here, the Upanishads present this concept of the bridge ultimately as the "Self" (Müller 1893, 195, 239). This spiritual-psychological connection is helpful to explaining thinking as being on par with religion. Like the Vedanta philosophy's self that is the Self (Müller 1893, 273), thinking, which is in part identified with us, also connects with something beyond us. If we follow Heidegger, it rather points to that thing from which it comes in the first place. Here, then, I do not want to assert religion as such an entity, following the anecdote of Vedanta and Avesta cosmology, as Brahman or Ahura Mazda. Yet I do want to say that it is reasonable to suppose religion as having been the alias of thinking since ancient times. This might help us make more sense of how thinking and religion are connected in the argument being made here, but also, and more significantly coming back to our main proposition: how we understand religion depends very much on thinking. In a way, we can say that it is a given that how we understand religion depends on our thinking. Still, we need to reintroduce ourselves to the idea anew if we are to allow ourselves the opportunity to bypass the conventional conceptualisation of thought and thinking paradigm about religion.

What does religion represent, if not the source of our existence? I would assert that religion is simultaneously held in our minds as both noun and verb in our thinking. It is by nature what we can externally observe as the religions of the world around us, as it is by its nature what has an effect on us, mentally, emotionally, and even physically. If, however, we apply Heidegger's treatment of thinking to our treatment of religion, another possibility presents itself in seeing religion (as both noun and verb) as a happening that is "thought-provoking," to use his phraseology; that is to say, it is that which happens without our willing it that provokes us to think. For Heidegger, thinking arises, it calls on us. (Which I suspect harks back to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII. VII. 7–9.) He may not be talking about religion, but it is easy enough to make the connection.

In fact, Heidegger's thinking on the human allows for a stronger support of this claim (Malpas 2023, 28):

> "The human is both the one who questions *and* the one who is in question. The human thus participates in opening a site for questioning, rather than being the already understood starting point from which such questioning can proceed."

For Malpas, this is an important point about his argument for the significance of "place" (in relation to thinking) in Heidegger's corpus, since the human is a limited and finite point from which language and poetry emerge as modes of thinking. This is important for me also in my argument for the connection between religion and thinking. In that same chapter, Malpas (2023, 48) discloses that that same finitude "that belongs to the human is therefore also a

finitude that belongs to being," because as he says a few lines earlier, it is clear that for Heidegger "that which is the *essence* of the human, is the site of being's appearing—is the site for the presencing of presence." I agree with Malpas that Heidegger consistently presents the human as a "site" that is "itself brought into the open in this very 'site.'" For me, also, this is a seamless way to consider thinking in relation to religion. Thinking, which is a principal activity of being human, and thus a signal that it is the site of the appearing of being through the activity of thinking, means that religion, which is comprehended through a thinking being's being, also occurs at this (human) site. If the human is the site of being's appearing, it must also be the site of religion's happening. Because the human being's thinking opens up the possibility of religion's arising on the horizon of being in a limited way, religion is in its fullness always kept open at the site of the human. It is with the human that we find the full splendour of the landscape of religiousness but always looking to the horizon of religion's possibility, which is available to us through thinking.

Müller spells this out, using theological language, as the activity of realising the thought of God by way of our thinking in this special sense. He says, "Eckhart looks upon the human soul as upon everything else, as thoughts spoken by God through creation" (Müller 1893, 515). Paraphrasing him, "In thinking Himself, the Father thinks everything that is within Him, that is, the ideas, the logoi of the unseen world ... that the world of thought, the *κόσμος νοητός*, can only be the thought of God" (Müller 1893, 513). Quoting Eckhart directly, "The eternal *Thought* or the Word of the Father, is the only begotten Son" (Müller 1893, 513; Pfeiffer 1947, 57). Müller's notion of religion as the bridge between the finite and the infinite becomes apparent (Müller 1893, 538–539). Unlike Heidegger, Müller's calls on the universal metaphor ("that of the sun and its rays"), which is seen from the Vedanta to the Sufis and among the German mystics.

> "The sun, as they all say, is not the sun, unless it shines forth; and God is not God, unless He shines forth, unless He manifests Himself ... No ray is lost, and though it seems to be a ray by itself, it remains for ever what it has always been, not separated from the light, nor lost in the light, but ever present in the sun ...The sun alone sends out its rays, and God alone sends out His souls" (Müller 1893, 539–540).

I would say, Müller's historical approach unconceals the theological meaning concealed by theology. Also, the power of understanding thought as the rays of light from its ultimate source bears uncanny resemblance to Heidegger's notion of the presencing.

If the relationship of the soul to God is maintained by Müller as the sending out of God from Himself, then, outside of its theological context, thought as the connecting link between us and the obscured realities of the past, can be philosophically read in Heidegger. Thinking thus is how we connect.

## 8. Conclusion: Why Thinking can be Thought of as Method

It has been my contention that Müller and Heidegger demonstrate the value of thinking as a pristine approach that augments the quest for understanding religion. They likewise help to substantiate religious studies as a distinctive discipline enhanced by the art of thinking. Whilst I submit both went beyond their respective disciplines vis-à-vis *thinking*, I will offer some closing remarks with the help of Heidegger.

Thinking is not only linked to questioning, which is for Heidegger "the piety of thinking," but it is likewise listening, which is for him perhaps more basic than questioning (Malpas 2023, 23, 23n.55, 64). I also agree that for Heidegger, thinking is a holding oneself open to being, to the world, to things, in terms of *Seinlassen* (letting be), and thus could even fundamentally be understood in the sense of *Gelassenheit*. Thinking does, therefore, involve questioning, but at issue is the sort of attentive and responsive questioning with regards to the opening up of *aletheia*. Because of this, I do not wish to force thinking as a method without acknowledging the tendency to reduce it to a formulaic proposition, or indeed a set of rules. Despite the risk, Heidegger's understanding of thinking does not preclude us from speaking about thinking as method, even if drawing on his later works. ["But where the danger is, the saving power also grows."] Where I take some liberty with Heidegger is on the basis that I believe his explication of thinking is that he is, on my reading, instructing us (though not prescribing) about how to think, and thereby he is—by way of his explication—preparing the way for understanding in his own works. What I submit he is also doing is showing us his "method." I have argued that this is an indication (though I admit not a clear one) of the link between thinking and method in the "Heideggerian" context, if I can call it that. He does not lay down the law, so to speak, but shows us signposts and gently guides us in the activity of thinking. Indeed, the "task of thinking" is the issue, which to me is none other than, simply put, a method. (And admittedly, this is to drastically simplify Heidegger for the purposes of making my point.) So, I ask, what is the task of thinking if not a method in the qualified way I have presented it in the introduction; as a versatile and adaptable approach in contrast to rigid and narrow methodological approaches of contemporary scholarly disciplines? If I am to follow what I have been arguing to its conclusion, I would say with greater force that thinking is not just *a* method; thinking is *the* (only) method of value in terms of a genuine philosophical pursuit where Heidegger is concerned, the basis of textual-historical inquiry according to Müller, and a necessary and much needed one for religious studies from where I stand.

The expectation set up for a renewed understanding of religious studies gives it the critical independence it needs to avoid being at the mercy of interdisciplinarity, as it currently is, thereby allowing it instead to maintain its own discipline. This discipline, I have argued, was there from the beginning but has been forgotten. Heidegger serves as a good example for two main reasons. He had set out to disclose being in history and thought, and thus moved to distance his thinking from philosophy just enough to enable a renewed framework for examining the history of philosophy. Heidegger's discipline is philosophy and its

accompanying methodology of critical analysis, but his "discipline" in truth comes forth as *poiesis* out of his "method" as thinking. This shows us a nuanced appreciation of both discipline and method, not in their normative usage but as distinctive indicators of the subtle art of academic research to which all academics might attest in their own experience of being in the flow of their work. Scholarly activity is in many ways much like the work of art in the Heideggerian sense. Indeed, Müller's example also supports this by way of his incidental discovery of the "science of religion." That is why discipline does not just describe a scholarly discipline but what it does, which is its forgotten first beginning. Religious studies is the discipline that is singularly focused on the extraction of the truth in religion and to disclose it in history and thought. Similarly, method is not just what scholars use to ratify their discipline but a technique for understanding. Thinking is the method in religious studies that sharpens its discipline in its search for truth. To consider discipline and method in the way we have, however, does court danger; it can catastrophise the value of both their originary activity through forgetfulness and even disavowal of thinking (Malpas 2023, 25–26). Yet I find Malpas' remark hopeful: "he [Heidegger] was not captured by those failures [of earlier thinking] but retained the capacity to think and re-think" (Malpas 2023, 26).

Religious studies, as I see it, is not exclusionary, but it is defined by a focused discipline by way of thinking about religion in ultimate terms. The polymethodic nature of its methodology embraces the various ways scholars from other disciplines can also invest in the quest for understanding religion, but the discipline of religious studies remains uncompromising in its approach. Historically, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, philosophers, and more, have all contributed to the signification of studying religion and religious studies has in turn honoured that as part of its quest. For how can studying religion be devoid of these crucial aspects of human life and living? More importantly, how can studying religion be devoid of the key aspect of their thinking? A discipline that is unequivocally *religious studies*.

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